



CITY OF TOPEKA

Topeka Zoo & Conservation Center
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY TOPEKA ZOO GOVERNANCE DISCUSSION

Objective: Create a governance model that allows for countywide public funding that promotes low cost admission, growth and an annual visitorship of 300,000 guests. The desired model would be similar to that of the Topeka Shawnee County Public Library or the Transit Authority. The first step in this process would be to shift the operation of the Topeka Zoo under Friends of the Topeka Zoo ("FOTZ") through a Public Private Partnership.

Background: Over the past thirty years, the Topeka Zoo has experienced cycles in which funding becomes strained followed by regulatory problems. Two previous cycles have resulted in consent agreements with the United States Department of Agriculture. The Topeka Zoo is currently operating in another one of these cycles.

During the last cycle, the City of Topeka requested a special inspection of the Topeka Zoo in 2009. One recommendation from the special inspection was to privatize the operation of the zoo through a public private partnership. Since the 1980's, privatizing the operation of publicly-owned zoos has become a zoo industry best practice.

Since 2013, City of Topeka funding for the Topeka Zoo began a trend of falling behind cost of business. To avoid past problems and keep available funding focused on critical areas, the City began outsourcing zoo functions to FOTZ. Examples of this include:

- 2013 - Food and beverage, admission and public area custodial services shifted to FOTZ.
- 2015 - FOTZ funds and employs the seasonal staff to work seasonal exhibits. These seasonal staff are FOTZ employees that report directly to City staff.
- 2018 - FOTZ began employing a full time educator to report directly to City staff as the City budget could no longer support the position in its temporary employee line. This fulltime educator reports directly to City staff.
- 2019 - FOTZ began employing camp counselors who report directly to City staff. While formerly volunteer/intern positions, new KDHE requirements makes them paid positions.

Why is now the right time to do this?

There is positive momentum at the Zoo. With the recent opening of two master plan projects, and funding for the third 80% in place, support of the zoo is at an all-time high. However, while we can grow infrastructure, we do not have a way to grow operations. Furthermore, we have already outsourced every possible function to FOTZ. If we don't change our model, we will need to change our product.

It would simplify operations if all employees were on the same team, rather than working under two separate organizations. This would allow all team members to have access to the appropriate tools to do their jobs and optimize fundraising efforts that would support all operations at the Zoo.

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What if we don't?

Any further delays will make it more challenging each year for City staff to maintain minimum standards. Standards are always going to be enhanced. Costs are always going to increase. If we don't change our operating model, we need to begin the process of downsizing to a zoo that the City can afford to operate in accord these enhanced standards. This will require prioritizing which animal groups we want to maintain and which buildings we want to keep open.

What about the Pandemic?

COVID-19 has been a great exercise in disaster management. City staff at the Zoo know what the direct cost of every animal, every building and every program is at the Zoo and has gone through the exercise of priority reductions based on any given scenario. Furthermore, because FOTZ is a 501(c)(3), FOTZ had access to additional CARES Act funding that the City did not. FOTZ staff have not had to face reductions like City staff has. FOTZ is ready to assume the full operation of the Topeka Zoo and Conservation Center.